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Privatising asylum: neoliberalisation, depoliticisation and the governance of forced migration

Jonathan Darling

This paper critically examines the political geography of asylum accommodation in the UK, arguing that in the regulation of housing and support services we witness the depoliticisation of asylum. In 2010, the UK Home Office announced that it would be passing contracts to provide accommodation and reception services for asylum seekers to a series of private providers, meaning the end of local authority control over asylum housing. This paper explores the impact of this shift and argues that the result is the production of an asylum market, in which neoliberal norms of market competition, economic efficiency and dispersed responsibility are central. In drawing on interviews with local authorities, politicians and asylum support services in four cities, the paper argues that the privatisation of accommodation has seen the emergence of new assemblages of authority, policy and governance. When combined with a market-oriented transfer of responsibilities, depoliticisation acts to constrain the possibilities of political debate and to predetermine the contours of those policy discussions that do take place. In making this case, the paper challenges the closures of work on post-politics, and argues for an exploration of the situated modalities of practice through which forms of depoliticisation interact with, and are constituted by, processes of neoliberalisation. In this context, the framing of asylum seekers as a 'burden' emerges as a discursive and symbolic achievement of the neoliberal politics of asylum accommodation. Framing asylum seekers as a burden represents both a move to position asylum as a specific and managerial issue, and at the same time reiterates an economic account of asylum as a question of resource allocation, cost and productivity.

Key words UK; asylum; neoliberalisation; depoliticisation; post-politics; interviews

Geography, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL
Email: jonathan.darling@manchester.ac.uk

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one of the reasons we have that model is that the providers we use are experienced in operating in *the asylum-seeking market*. (Small, G4S in evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee 2013; emphasis added)

the practice of neoliberal statecraft is inescapably, and profoundly, marked by compromise, calculation, and contradiction. There is no blueprint. There is not even a map. (Peck 2010, 106)

In March 2012, the UK government signed six contracts for the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers and their families. These contracts mark the latest phase in a process of accommodation termed dispersal that has, since the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, provided housing on a 'no choice' basis to asylum seekers across Britain (see Phillips 2006; Robinson *et al.* 2003). The six contracts signed in 2012 became collectively known as COMPASS (Commercial and Operating Managers Procuring Asylum Support), and marked a significant shift in the landscape of asylum

support in the UK. The COMPASS contracts transferred accommodation provision from a mixture of consortiums of local authorities, social housing associations and private providers, to just three private contractors – the multinational security services company G4S, the international services company Serco and the accommodation partnership Clearell.¹ Of these providers, only Clearell had any prior experience of housing asylum seekers (National Audit Office 2014, 4). By contrast, both G4S and Serco have previously held contracts to manage immigration removal centres and aspects of the UK's deportation regime. This paper critically examines the political geography of asylum accommodation through COMPASS, and provides a first discussion of the production, maintenance and regulation of what a G4S representative describes above as 'the asylum-seeking market'.

Compared with practices of deportation and detention (Anderson *et al.* 2011; Collyer 2012; Gill 2009; Malloch and Stanley 2005), the enforced (im)mobility

of asylum seekers through dispersal has received relatively little academic attention (but see Bloch and Schuster 2005; Gledhill 2014; Hynes 2009, 2011; Phillips 2006; Stevens 2004). In addressing this lacuna, this paper makes three significant contributions. First, drawing on literatures on the neoliberalisation of various state functions (see Newman 2014; Williams *et al.* 2012), the paper advances debates over how neoliberal logics of market competition, economic efficiency and contractualism are reshaping sites of service provision and political authority. Through examining the effects of COMPASS on asylum housing, the paper argues that we witness a considerable degree of continuity between the mixed provision of previous regimes and the current COMPASS model. As Squire (2009) notes, the UK has a history of treating asylum as a business. From the profits made by private security firms from the UK's detention estate, to exploitative charges for poor legal advice, asylum has been an issue of public policy from which profit has long been sought. Yet, with the onset of COMPASS, I argue we see an intensification of these trends. Importantly, we see an extenuated fragmentation of the accommodation system, such that an increasingly uneven geography of service provision is emerging. While the market logics that shape dispersal are not necessarily new, their extension has had distinct effects for local authorities, service providers and support organisations. Rather than assuming a shift from public to private provision, the paper challenges the clarity of this distinction and suggests the need to attend to neoliberalisation as a process. Neoliberalisation forges alliances between formerly public and private organisations and interests, but it also shapes perceptual orientations and political expectations (Brown 2015). In the context of asylum policy, this means the creation of shared understandings of asylum as a political and economic concern, most notably maintained through the rhetorical positioning of asylum seekers as a 'burden' on both public and private stakeholders. The paper thus significantly advances discussions of neoliberalisation through applying such insights to the asylum system for the first time, and through demonstrating how the new assemblages of authority produced through COMPASS depoliticise asylum as a matter of economic concern.

Second, the paper draws on emergent debates over the nature of depoliticisation as a process through which particular concerns are displaced from political discussion (Darling 2014; Gill *et al.* 2012; Wilson 2014). More specifically, the paper argues that in the asylum accommodation system we witness the depoliticising effects of neoliberal governmentality through efforts to position asylum accommodation as a managerial concern. When combined with a market-oriented transfer of responsibilities, depoliticisation acts to constrain the possibilities

of political debate and to predetermine the contours of those policy discussions that do take place. The discursive framing of asylum seekers as a burden emerges as the distillation of this process, the confluence of a logic of the market and a process of depoliticisation that both legitimates and protects such a logic. In making this case, the paper challenges work on post-politics (Swyngedouw 2011; Žižek 1999), and argues for an exploration of the situated modalities of practice and authority through which forms of depoliticisation interact with processes of neoliberalisation. The paper thus reorients discussions of depoliticisation by exploring the nuances of work on depoliticisation in the political sciences (Hay 2007; Wood and Flinders 2014), to present an account of neoliberal depoliticisation as a profoundly political process.

Finally, the paper responds to a lack of critical engagement with the nature, governance and effects of dispersal as a process of governing forced migrants, through detailing how COMPASS has served to relocate asylum both geographically and discursively. Geographically, this means the emergence of new spaces of dispersal and the production of increasingly fractured assemblages of governance. Discursively, this means the extension of a depoliticising trend that positions asylum seekers as problematic presences to be regulated according to logics of procedural efficiency and emergency measures.

The paper proceeds in four sections. In the first of these, I examine how recent debates over neoliberalism and depoliticisation may be placed in conversation. The paper then moves to explore three trends under COMPASS. First, the imposition of COMPASS on previous models of provision and the production of new hierarchies of authority. Second, the strengthening of limits on discussion within stakeholder forums, such that contractualism and the outsourcing of responsibility produces a depoliticisation of accommodation. And finally, the emergence of a narrative of the burden as a rhetorical frame within which dispersal is set. In reflecting on these trends, the paper concludes by arguing that what COMPASS represents is the latest distillation of a process to profit from those held at the thresholds of the state.

Neoliberalism and depoliticisation

Discussions of neoliberalism have variously viewed it as a strategy, a process, an ideology or an assemblage that is most often aligned with

viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action. Redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations, neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets. (Dean 2009, 51; see also Harvey 2005; Ong 2006)

Clarke thus argues that the legitimization of neoliberalism as a political and economic rationale was in part based on 'the celebration of the market as dynamic, innovative and flexible' (2004, 32), and the gradual shifting of state competencies and responsibilities from public to private provision in response. In this predominantly economic reading, neoliberalism does not rely on pre-existing socio-political conditions, but rather shapes the realities of competition and innovation it espouses. In this process, as Dean suggests, 'neoliberalism accords to the state an active role in securing markets, in producing the subjects of and conditions for markets' (2009, 51). Understood in these broad terms, neoliberalism offers one understanding of how markets are produced and sustained through processes of privatisation, contractualism and the outsourcing of state responsibilities, all of which play a part in constituting the contemporary asylum market.²

Drawing on economic readings of neoliberalism, a range of work exploring the practice of government (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Foucault 2008; Lemke 2001) has examined neoliberalism as a specific rationality of government, focused on two distinct technologies. First, the production and installation of '“economic” logics of calculation (constituted through discourses of markets, efficiency, managerialism, consumer choice and individual autonomy)' in public and political life, such that cost-benefit analyses and growth-orientated policies become normalised as common sense responses to a range of social concerns (Newman 2014, 3292). And second, the promotion of individuals as self-governing subjects, who themselves are subject to logics of calculation and benefit maximisation (Rose 1999). Viewed through such a lens, an account of neoliberal governmentality 'involves forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market' (Larner 2000, 12), and actively produces and communicates such norms within both institutions and individuals.

Emerging from these discussions of neoliberalism is a sense of the productive nature of a mode of governmentality that constitutes relations and repositions distinctions of public and private. Ferguson and Gupta thus argue that neoliberal governmentality does not simply describe the 'rolling back' of the state, but rather entails a 'transfer of the operations of government ... to nonstate entities', thereby producing not 'less government', but rather, 'a new modality of government' (2002, 989). This new modality is not a finalised or fixed form of government, but rather a process of neo-liberalisation (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Springer 2010), that is adaptive, geographically contingent and involves the interaction of multiple impulses to co-opt, engage, subvert and ignore multiple actors, the state among them. Thus, while narratives of

'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell 2002) are not mutually exclusive, Blanco *et al.* argue that in many cases the state is 'best understood as simultaneously retreating and advancing' as 'its withdrawal from direct service delivery [is] matched by its advance into regulation of service delivery by others' (2014, 3133). Indeed, as a variety of studies have illustrated, as support for state-funded social care has dwindled in much of the global north, new models of partnership and co-option have emerged that increasingly position the state as providing regulatory oversight, rather than direct accountability (Cloeke *et al.* 2010; Larner and Craig 2005).

This is, therefore, to view neoliberalism as a political rationality, a 'form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices, and citizenship' and that 'governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains' (Brown 2006, 693). It is in this practice of governing that neoliberalism has been aligned with processes of depoliticisation. This connection has been made most forcefully by those examining the nature of the post-political as a condition in which capitalism is naturalised as 'the unquestioned horizon of our political possibilities' (Swyngedouw and Wilson 2014, 302), with neoliberalism positioned as a pervasive symptom of such a naturalisation. This frame of analysis has been utilised to address a broad range of issues, from planning and urban policy to sustainability and climate change (Allmendinger and Haughton 2009; MacLeod 2011; Swyngedouw 2009 2011; Williams and Booth 2013). While post-politics is associated with a radical foreclosure of political possibility (Žižek 1999), it has been argued to represent only one form of depoliticisation (Gill *et al.* 2012). By contrast, depoliticisation itself has been argued to represent a broader set of governmental strategies for managing, creating and obscuring political discussion. In addressing the neoliberalisation of asylum, it is these broader strategies of depoliticisation that come to the fore.

Theorists of the post-political argue that neoliberal political rationalities act to condition the limits of political possibility, such that neoliberal governmentality '(re-)defines some issues as private, technical or managerial, removing them from overtly political decision making and contentious politics' (Jessop 2014, 211). The definitional work described here is a key attribute of the politics of asylum. As I shall explore shortly, neoliberal logics act in this context to provide 'a disciplinary framework that keeps in check ... potential politicisation' (Gough 2002, 421). Yet there is a need for caution in too readily assigning this disciplinary work to a post-political frame. This is the case not least because discussions of the post-political have been accused of homogenising neoliberalism and ceding too

easily the grounds of contestation (see Dean 2009; Larnar 2014). What emerges from discussions of neoliberalisation as a process is a recognition that the apparent successes of neoliberal thought are based on a considerable degree of political work and maintenance (see Clarke 2004; Springer 2010). As Larnar suggests, in different spatial and political contexts we witness 'different configurations of neoliberalism', which 'reveal a complex and hybrid political imaginary, rather than the straightforward implementation of a unified and coherent political philosophy' (2000, 12; Murray Li 2007; Ong 2006). The institutional forms that enable, constrain and constitute neoliberal governmentalities are constantly being shaped and reshaped as they enter into relations both with other institutions and authorities, and as they are enacted by the practice of those within such institutions (Williams *et al.* 2012). Importantly, this foregrounds both the work that goes into producing markets and maintaining neoliberal modes of thought, and the concurrent openness of neoliberalism to subversion. Rather than positioning neoliberalism as 'all-encompassing' to the point of obscuring 'already existing alternatives' (Larnar 2014, 194), recent debates have demonstrated the conflicts that emerge in forms of neoliberal governmentality as they adapt to new contexts (Hiemstra 2010; Williams *et al.* 2012).

It is these contingent and adaptive characteristics within neoliberal governmentality that are most readily overlooked in discussions of post-politics as a condition (Badiou 2003; Žižek 1999). Such rhetoric risks closing an attentiveness to existing modes of political activism (see Larnar 2014; O'Callaghan *et al.* 2014; Van Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck 2014). In response, there is a need to examine depoliticisation as a heterogeneous set of political strategies that work alongside processes of neoliberalisation. This means, in part, returning to the definitional work of neoliberal governmentality noted above, and viewing depoliticisation as a multiple set of 'ordering tendencies and alliances that produce and maintain particular perceptual orientations towards the contours and limits of political debate' (Darling 2014, 74). This means considering how alternative readings have explored the practice of depoliticisation as a tool of government and even, somewhat counter-intuitively, as a mode of politicisation (see Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2005; Foster *et al.* 2014; Hay 2007).

For example, Wood and Flinders (2014) argue that depoliticisation is not just about the displacement of issues and functions from the governmental to the nongovernmental sphere, but also of how this displacement becomes common sense. This involves not simply the 'withdrawal of politicians from the direct control of a vast range of functions' (Wood and Flinders 2014, 156), as associated with governmental depoliticisation and accounts of neoliberalism as a

policy and program of market prioritisation (Springer 2012; Ward and England 2007). It also involves an intertwined process of discursive depoliticisation in which 'the debate surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal' (Wood and Flinders 2014, 161). It is this latter form of depoliticisation that is often argued to reflect the closure of alternative imaginaries, as alternatives are derided as radical, dangerous or utopian. For Jessop (2014, 208) this describes the 'depoliticising aim of neoliberal policies' – to police the distribution of social relations and issues as political or non-political concerns. One means to maintain such a distinction is through what Jessop terms 'sedimentation', whereby 'forms of routinisation ... lead to a forgetting of the contested origins of political discourses', such that they acquire 'the form and appearance of objective facts of life' (2014, 216). Sedimentation 'removes many taken-for-granted themes from the political field ... or from policy considerations' (2014, 216), and is key when considering the politics of asylum. From this perspective depoliticisation is not an endpoint, but rather an effect of policies and processes that are open to challenge (Beveridge and Naumann 2014).

In the remainder of this paper, I argue that in the contemporary asylum market, we see the intertwining of these governmental and discursive modes of depoliticisation, as both draw on, and help to sustain, neoliberal logics. In doing so, the paper draws on empirical material from a larger project, exploring the relationship between asylum seekers, dispersal and urban governance in the UK. Focused on four cities (Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and Sunderland), this project involved 105 interviews with stakeholders in the asylum accommodation and support sector, including local authority representatives, councillors, service providers, support organisations, third sector groups and asylum seekers.³ This paper examines interviews with those within the asylum sector of each city, namely those involved in either local authority, third sector or voluntary service provision, in order to trace their experiences of asylum policy.⁴ In what follows, I focus on three trends described by those in contact with the asylum market on a daily basis to chart its changing nature.

New assemblages of authority

The first change to note is in the shifting range of actors involved in relationships of governance and provision through COMPASS. Prior to COMPASS, the provision of housing for asylum seekers across the UK was arranged through a series of contracts between the Home Office and consortiums of local authorities on a predominantly regional basis. Consortiums varied in

their make up between regions and over time, with some representing partnerships between local authorities and private accommodation providers and others providing housing solely through local authority stock. Local authorities were the dominant partners and were in charge of coordinating dispersals with the Home Office, with procuring and monitoring properties, and with providing limited support services. This meant coordinating with other service providers and organisations, such as third sector groups and charities, to meet the needs of dispersed asylum seekers.

This model of coordination might be seen to reflect what Clarke (2004, 36) terms a 'dispersed state' in which 'the number of agents and agencies involved in delivering a particular service' are multiplied as service providers and intermediaries become 'the proxies of state power' (see also Clarke and Newman 1997). The outcome is not simply new relationships between public and private actors, but also 'new systems of regulation, inspection and audit' (Clarke 2004, 36). Dwyer (2005, 623) argues that such relationships have often characterised the 'complex networks of governance' that have shaped asylum support at local and national levels since 2000. For example, Ruth, the policy coordinator for a national refugee organisation, noted that

I think it has been different in different areas, because in some areas there have been asylum teams who were in place, to do a lot of the support, signposting and troubleshooting. And before they worked with the private contractors, so they had a really good understanding of the needs of individual asylum seekers. They were able to link them into services at local authority level ... And in some local authorities, for a short period there seemed to be a shift where councils were seeing themselves as a scrutiny body [for the COMPASS contracts] ... but over time, they seem to have lost interest in that agenda. (Ruth interview 2013)

As Ruth highlights, prior to COMPASS, some local authorities provided connections with private accommodation providers and other groups, reflecting a dispersed state in which public and private interests overlapped in response to the needs of the Home Office. Yet, with the emergence of the COMPASS contracts, the role of local authorities was significantly changed, as the privatisation of dispersal shifted the balance of power within this dispersed state. It is this changing balance of power that has produced a series of new assemblages of authority within asylum accommodation.

The transfer of responsibility for asylum accommodation from local authorities to private providers that COMPASS achieved meant that local authorities were no longer the central and most significant contact point for Home Office consultation on dispersal. Rather, this role was taken by private providers who assumed new responsibilities, and authority, through their contractual links. This transfer reflects a form of

governmental depoliticisation that Foster *et al.* (2014) suggest is a key part of neoliberal governmentality. For Foster *et al.*, governmental depoliticisation involves the 'shifting of responsibility as the state appears to subordinate itself to the operation of the market', by transferring formerly public services to private providers and those seen to be 'less overtly political' (2014, 236). Foster *et al.* thus conclude that a process of governmental depoliticisation is essential to neoliberalisation, as 'depoliticisation is the ostensible façade of rolling back the state while governmentality is the insidious rolling forward of the state's agenda through the buying in (or buying off) of other organisations' (2014, 239).

In the case of COMPASS, this process of governmental depoliticisation is marked by the production of new relations of authority and new positions within hierarchies of power for existing actors. For example, from a prior context in which local authorities were key to the management of dispersal, with COMPASS they reported a lack of consultation over dispersal decisions, policy and processes. As both Sarah, a policy officer in Cardiff, and Gareth, a third sector representative in Birmingham, illustrate,

they [local authorities] do feel like it's something that's happened to them ... (Sarah interview 2013)

when I speak to local authorities in the region that's invariably the most common message that comes down is that they feel that it's been imposed upon them. (Gareth interview 2013)

Local authorities are having to readjust their position in response to COMPASS, moving from being a stakeholder with critical responsibilities in the asylum accommodation process to being simply another actor with an interest in the process. Crucially, having an interest in the process does not translate into the ability to shape policy discussions or to challenge the judgement of the Home Office. Local authorities are still part of the wider asylum sector, but no longer retain power over accommodation decisions. In some contexts, this has led to a lack of engagement from local authorities as the roll back of responsibilities and financial support has meant there is limited incentive, and capacity, to remain present in asylum policy discussions.⁵ Thus as Marie, a third sector representative from Cardiff, and Paul, a policy coordinator for a national refugee organisation, suggest:

since COMPASS there's been a lack of engagement from the city council, it simply isn't a priority anymore. (Marie interview 2013)

What we have now is ... local authorities don't really have too much sight of asylum seekers under COMPASS. Services are provided by the three contractors and then it feels like

they're sort of spat out at the end and told to go and present at the local authority office ... either with a positive decision or more commonly with a refusal so there doesn't seem to be any sort of carrot for the local authority to get involved because why would they, there's no incentive for them to do so. (Paul interview 2013)

The dispersed state of actors and agencies that now manages asylum accommodation is thus a state in which actors retain and express varying levels of influence. The impact of COMPASS has been to shift discretionary authority away from local authorities and to place this firmly with the Home Office. While under previous dispersal arrangements, the autonomy of local authorities was limited, they retained the ability to engage the Home Office as they were essential service providers. By contrast, under COMPASS local authorities are positioned outside such provision. The effect is that while dispersal may reflect a model of the dispersed state, this dispersed state is also increasingly, and paradoxically, a centralised state in terms of where authority lies. Through COMPASS, greater control over accommodation and discretion is sought and retained by the Home Office.

Continuity and the translation of neoliberalism

It is important to remember that the dispersed state that exists around asylum accommodation is not necessarily new (Dwyer 2005). Rather, local authorities and other agencies have played varying roles within partnerships of asylum governance that pre-date COMPASS, such as offering social housing and developing integration and drop-in services (Squire 2009). Thus, as Newman argues, in the UK local authorities have been constituted as 'responsible political and managerial subjects ... within a centralised system of governing in which there is little room for discretion' (2014, 3294). Local authorities, alongside third sector organisations and agencies, thus play a role in reproducing neoliberalism as they 'mediate and translate neoliberal projects in line with "local" needs, goals and values' (Newman 2014, 3295). In effect, local authorities, private providers and third sector organisations are all positioned as constituting the neoliberal governmentality of asylum accommodation through assenting to a model of provision that is based on market logics of efficiency, flexibility and cost. Within this model, local authorities may be able to effect the translation of neoliberal projects to the local as Newman (2014) suggests, but in highly restricted ways.

For example, in the case of Birmingham, this process of translation was effected through the decision from the local authority to formally withdraw from the dispersal system in October 2010. Importantly, this

decision was accompanied by a widely reported claim, from the then head of housing, that

Hundreds of Brummies,⁶ hundreds of my people are in B&Bs instead of council-provided homes. Why should that be? My people have got to come first ... The asylum seekers arrive here, they have a blooming family and they keep having children – it's a burden on the system. (Bloxham 2010, np)

The significance of this statement was in how it posed this decision as one of prioritisation, cost and a concern with asylum seekers as a burden. And as Warren, a third sector representative from Birmingham, recalls, the statement helped shape the tenor of debate over asylum in the city:

the comments weren't really challenged that much at all ... the council were able to position the whole thing as 'we're doing this for our people', and that being seen in quite a positive way when times are difficult ... Within the agencies working to support asylum seekers, it was very different. We were concerned by the message it sent out, but by then, the big players were looking to move in. There was a lot of concern about what that means, people like G4S moving into the realm of social housing. (Warren interview 2013)

The decision to withdraw from the Home Office contract and end public housing for asylum seekers in Birmingham presented an important moment within the neoliberalisation of asylum accommodation. It both presented an opportunity for the 'big players' of private provision to move into asylum accommodation through creating the need for new contractual arrangements from the Home Office and at the same time conveyed a message that asylum was no longer considered a priority for public concern, as Warren recounts. In this context, both the decision of the local authority and the language through which it was executed played a significant role in translating and embedding neoliberal governmental norms of efficiency and prioritisation into the local politics of asylum.

Importantly though, this process of translation is open to only a defined set of parameters and possibilities – rejecting the economic calculus of dispersal as a profit-making business and seeking to resist marketisation is not an option. Thus where the localised reworking of the neoliberal project of dispersal does take place, it often assumes the form of an extension of neoliberal governmentality to the social and political distinctions of citizenship as much as the economic distinctions of cost and welfare. As illustrated here, in Birmingham, the re-imagining of the asylum market around local needs (Bloxham 2010), was part of a revanchist trend to socially marginalise those seeking asylum as an economic and fiscal drain during a time of austerity, at the expense of a citizenry constructed as 'our' people.⁷

Furthermore, Newman (2014, 3298) notes that many of the formations now associated with neoliberal modes of governance in the UK have their origins in the responses of local authorities to past threats, such as outsourcing. This is one of the ways in which neoliberal governmentalities are seen to be adaptive, mutable and contingently embedded (Haughton *et al.* 2013). In the dispersal system, we might think of how a hybrid model of provision that established relations between public and private accommodation providers emerged before COMPASS as a means of local authorities keeping hold of potentially lucrative dispersal contracts. In Cardiff, the reality of dispersal was one of mixed provision from the outset, with social housing associations, private providers and the local authority working together to provide housing stock. As Marie, a policy coordinator from Cardiff, highlights, this had the advantage of establishing a series of relationships that would help to ensure the transition to COMPASS was relatively smooth:

the provider we have now is one of the providers from the mixed scheme that used to run, so this meant everyone had some experience of working together. I don't think that's always been the case elsewhere from what I've been told ... It's become more difficult over time as the demands of their contract have been hard to meet. They talk about the 'challenges of delivery', especially as dispersal numbers have risen, and this has put some of those relationships under strain. (Marie interview 2013)

In this context, the local authority had established networks and relationships that could be drawn on to ease the process of COMPASS transition. This again challenges the notion of a clear distinction between public and private interests and activities in asylum accommodation, and suggests less a stark shift in approach with the onset of COMPASS and more an acceleration of a process already underway. It is in this manner that neoliberalisation as an incomplete process might be traced in the actions, responses, exchanges and tensions of local authorities and private providers.

However, while local authorities have played a part in constituting the marketisation of dispersal, this process is neither geographically even nor complete. In Glasgow, for example, the inclusion of private providers was strongly resisted by the local authority, in part due to the availability of hard-to-let public housing in the city that could be maintained through the income of dispersal contracts.

Rather, local authorities retain varied positions on dispersal and the centralisation of COMPASS can be read as one attempt to bypass some of these distinctions and variegations. In their place we might see a more homogenous model associated with governmental depoliticisation – the shifting of responsibility to private

agencies who are assumed to share the dominant rationalities and interests of government in service delivery, efficiency and profitability.

In seeking to produce an asylum dispersal system that is easier to mediate through COMPASS, the Home Office has relied on the establishment of a series of stakeholder forums, where the different actors of the dispersed state come together to discuss dispersal. It is here, as much as anywhere else, that dispersal gets produced and interpreted, as Gareth, as well as Alice – a policy coordinator from Glasgow – discuss:

the Home Office they have all these fancy stakeholder engagement forums ... we attend but invariably it is somebody from high up saying well this is our new model, this is what we're going to do and us saying well have you thought about this ... but they never really seem to listen. (Gareth interview 2013)

the way it [the stakeholder forum] tends to work is that ... it's not really a decision-making forum it's more of a discussion and debate ... type of forum. Glasgow City Council sit on that and the accommodation providers sit on that and the Home Office play a part too. (Alice interview 2013).

The stakeholder forums referred to here might be viewed as the spaces through which the governance of asylum accommodation is enacted, while also being the spaces in which processes of depoliticisation come to the fore. The hierarchies of imposition that Gareth describes run through relations between the Home Office and accommodation providers, local authorities, the third sector and others, all of whom contribute to the governmental depoliticisation of dispersal as a concern of private providers. Importantly though, as Mark, a representative from a third sector organisation in Glasgow, makes clear, given the contractual arrangements of COMPASS, stakeholder forums are now one of the few channels of communication left between local authorities and the Home Office:

Because there's no direct link now, with the Home Office and local authority, you know, there's no contractual link on anything, so the engagement happens at different forums ... I think it was more structured in the past. (Mark interview 2013)

Beyond this role within governmental communication, the position of stakeholder forums has itself shifted under COMPASS. In the following section, I explore these changes and how such forums may effect a discursive depoliticisation of dispersal, alongside the governmental depoliticisation noted above.

Soft spaces and discursive depoliticisation

Across each of the regions examined through this research, the function and focus of these stakeholder forums was seen to have shifted in response to

COMPASS. As Marie, a policy coordinator from Cardiff, noted:

now there are certainly less people in the room [compared to before COMPASS] ... when we do meet there is much less of a focus on longer term planning or integration, the capacity to propose things just isn't there, everything is a case of 'is it in the contract?' (Marie interview 2013)

Similarly, Ruth, the policy coordinator for a national refugee organisation, recounted that

My impression with Serco is ... they appear to be always, as you would predict, talking about bottom line, and the fact that only these things are noted in their contract. And if you want to argue with anyone then argue with UKBA⁸ who awarded it to us, you know ... there is a determination to cut corners wherever. (Ruth interview 2013)

Two dimensions of these stakeholder forums are notable here; first, that with COMPASS not only did the constituency of such groups alter, as the dispersed state encompassed new and different actors, but the nature of the discussion itself altered. As Marie notes, a reduced focus on longer term planning resulted, partly from a reduced engagement from some agencies, such as local authorities and support services. Second, with COMPASS, discussion became centred very much on the limits, expectations and requirements of the COMPASS contracts themselves as the orientation points behind any discussion.

One effect of COMPASS was therefore to extend the dominance of contractual modes of relation, such that private providers increasingly utilise their contractual obligations as leverage to influence other actors and to insulate themselves from criticism. As Raco highlights, this turn to contractualism in the delivery of public services comes at a cost because

private companies wish to be insulated from the democratic demands of social groups, and look to contracts and techniques of risk management to limit the effects of policy changes on their profitability. (2014, 31)

Contracts may serve to institutionalise a process of 'separation and insulation' in which profits are protected at the expense of democratic accountability (2014, 31; see Riles 2008). The effect is one of reinforcing the governmental depoliticisation of dispersal, for instead of providing scope for discussion of 'changing and adapting the operation of government policy and state activities', we see 'a field of contract negotiations in which state actors and citizens are required to negotiate with private delivery companies over the types of demands they are prepared to meet' (Raco 2014, 31). Contracts in this context establish in advance the scope of any subsequent discussion, as providers are not obliged to consider issues that fall outside their contractual responsibilities. Furthermore, as both Ruth and Marie indicate, this means that what

time there is to discuss the working of dispersal policy tends to be dominated by exploring contracts and their implications in practice. Similarly, in discussing the work of the forums, Farah, a policy coordinator from Birmingham, notes:

It is difficult because obviously the local authorities are no longer in contract any more, and then you've got the private organisation that have obviously got their objectives and their outcomes; so it's just trying to facilitate better discussion and support everybody to come to agreements. And that's taken up a lot of time ... The frustration is then being able to do some real policy work in those areas because we just don't have the capacity to do it any more. (Farah interview 2014)

In this context, we might argue that such stakeholder forums act as what Haughton *et al.* term 'soft spaces' (2013, 222). That is, spaces that 'exist outside, alongside or in-between the formal statutory scales of government' (Haughton *et al.* 2013, 217), and allow for 'legitimising deals and understandings by a mix of elected and unelected actors' (2013, 218). The importance of such soft spaces is that they provide scope for 'demands to be voiced and negotiated, as long as they do not question and disrupt the overarching framework of market-led development' (Haughton *et al.* 2013, 218). The stakeholder forums that mark the asylum policy landscape play a critical role in providing a space for negotiation between actors, from the Home Office to the third sector, but within a series of prescribed limits. Read in such a way, the contractualism of COMPASS has served to insulate asylum policy from critical discussion, as contracts maintain and reconfigure hierarchies of authority and interest. We might see the role of such soft spaces more fully by considering one further issue central to the governance of dispersal – the question of parity.

Parity and the burden

Parity refers to the limits established between the Home Office and local authorities from the outset of dispersal in 2000, to ensure that the population of asylum seekers dispersed to a particular ward is in proportion to the overall population of that ward (National Audit Office 2014). A level of one asylum seeker to every 200 individuals in the wider population was established as a national limit that should not be exceeded in order to 'maintain community cohesion' (National Audit Office 2014, 33). The importance of parity is that it remains one of the few areas of asylum policy over which local authorities retain a level of (relative) control. For while Clearel, G4S and Serco are in contract to provide accommodation, if they wish to procure properties for this purpose they must first inform and gain the permission of the local authority to

do so. In both Birmingham and Cardiff, this question of the procurement, and how this might affect perceived parity limits, was a key concern for local authorities and asylum support organisations. Farah highlighted tensions around parity as a point of conflict:

Recently within Birmingham they [the local authority] were told if they didn't give a better answer to why they said no to some property they'd [the Home Office and G4S] go ahead and procure anyway ... I think people feel that if there is an issue around numbers of people within particular areas, where concerns have been raised, what teeth do they [local authorities] actually have to change that, because they don't essentially, because you're not holding the contract. (Farah interview 2014)

As Farah's comments indicate, parity is a contested area within dispersal policy. For while parity limits are not necessarily exceeded, the perception of inequalities between local authorities in how close to the limit they are is a cause for considerable tension. Decisions over the procurement of new properties is one area in which local authorities can respond to their concerns over parity. Procurement represents a concern through which local authorities are seen to possess some capacity to affect decisions, but also a site of imposition, as ultimately local authorities are subject to the ability of the Home Office to over-rule these decisions if they see fit.

However, the importance of parity is not simply in its reflection on the power relations of COMPASS. Rather, parity as an issue serves to dominate discussions and, alongside the contractual negotiations already noted, becomes the only site of legitimate disagreement in stakeholder discussions. Paul notes parity as a key concern within his work with stakeholder forums:

there is meant to be a form of dialogue between the Home Office and the local authority which is meant to set the dispersal limit [parity] but they're not on equal footing ... what you tend to find is it is the Home Office telling what will happen or informing us that this policy will change ... and there's no consultation as to whether that's a good idea ... often we'll end up going round in circles discussing things like dispersal limits, when the real decision has already been taken. (Paul interview 2013)

Politically, the contracts of COMPASS and the issue of parity play two complementary roles. First, they displace concern with wider issues of social justice and the dispersal system, by focusing attention on a narrow field of discussion and reducing the space for considering alternative approaches or policy initiatives. In part this denotes one effect of the governmental depoliticisation of dispersal that occurs when a set of responsibilities are privatised. Focusing on the contract and the distribution of populations serves to insulate the wider neoliberal logics that underpin the asylum

market from critical scrutiny. Second, they serve to reproduce a notion of asylum seekers as a burden that has emerged as the dominant discursive framing of asylum dispersal. Since its initial proposal in the 1998 *Fairer, faster and firmer* White Paper, dispersal has been described as a means to 'relieve the burden on provision in London' (Home Office 1998, 8.22). As dispersal proceeded across the 2000s, this notion of 'spreading the burden' became a commonplace rhetorical device for describing the accommodation process, even shaping academic analyses of the effectiveness of dispersal (see Boswell 2003; Robinson *et al.* 2003). In this context, parity calls for discussion of the fairness or equity of distribution, but not the nature of that to be distributed. Parity serves as an illustration of the discursive depoliticisation of asylum accommodation, such that the nature of debates over accommodation is defined in advance and the contours of acceptable speech are policed in varying ways (Rancière 2010). To illustrate this further, I turn to one final example.

The question of parity is not only discussed by local authorities at the ward level. Rather, we also see claims from local authorities themselves to being unfairly treated when compared with others. Thus while dispersal was originally designed as a means to alleviate a perceived burden on London (Robinson *et al.* 2003), debate now focuses on whether such a burden is being evenly borne across the rest of the UK. Most recently, this issue was raised by Liverpool City Council, who felt that parity limits were being exceeded in some wards. Liverpool's mayor, Joe Anderson, was reported as stating that in his opinion

There seems to be a sort of asylum apartheid operating where certain cities are the ones that are taking the unfair share. (Precey 2015, np)

In response, the Home Office refuted Anderson's claims, and argued that no areas in the North West exceed 'the agreed convention of one accommodated asylum claimant for every 200 of the resident local authority population' (Precey 2015, np). While the questions of fairness and resources that are raised here are important, the debate over distributions, parity and a perceived asylum apartheid reflects the success of the burden narrative in dictating the terms on which asylum accommodation has been discussed over the last 16 years. This presents a mode of discursive depoliticisation, whereby 'the debate surrounding an issue becomes technocratic, managerial, or disciplined towards a single goal' (Wood and Flinders 2014, 161). Framing asylum accommodation as a question of how to best manage and provide for a burden on the state serves to focus attention on precisely these managerial questions of distribution, allocation and procedural requirement. When placed alongside the governmental depoliticisation of asylum accommodation that accom-

panies a transfer of responsibility to the private sector and a model of contractual insulation, the narrative of the burden illustrates the engrained nature of economic logics of calculation and profit that run through dispersal.

The burden as a way of perceiving asylum seekers and implementing, negotiating and discussing policies of procurement, is a critical tool of the neoliberal governmentality of citizenship in contemporary Britain, whereby citizens and non-citizens alike are distinguished by virtue of their capacity for entrepreneurialism of varying kinds, from business development and innovation to the ability to perform expectations of the 'genuine' refugee (Tyler 2010). Over the course of the dispersal process, viewing asylum seekers as a burden to be distributed and regulated, but also a burden that can be, and should be, made profitable for different actors and agencies, has become normalised to such an extent that it is now common sense. It is, to use Jessop's (2014) phrase, sedimented as a naturalised and discursively uncontested means of describing a social issue. The importance of this normalisation is that it necessarily forecloses other potential political viewpoints on how asylum might be framed in public policy. We might think here of asylum accommodation as an opportunity for regeneration and renewal in neglected parts of urban Britain (Phillimore and Goodson 2006), or of cities as sites of insurgent modes of citizenship that are decoupled from immigration status (Darling 2016a; Nyers 2011). Starting from the assumption of a burden of asylum provision means that an economic rationale that values asylum accommodation for the profit it may bring, rather than the questions of social justice it raises, is embedded at the heart of how policies are formed, interpreted and enacted. It is, therefore, through the narrative of the burden, as much as the privatisation of COMPASS, that the asylum market is reproduced and legitimated in practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered a first examination of recent changes in the nature of asylum accommodation in the UK, arguing that the model we see in existence today reflects a form of neoliberal governmentality in which economic calculations and narratives of 'worthiness', 'welfare' and 'prioritisation' intersect to reproduce asylum-seeking as a market. The culmination of this process is the rhetorical hegemony of the burden as a frame through which dispersal is understood. From its inception as a managerial system, asylum accommodation has been positioned as a response to a perceived burden, yet COMPASS expands and extends this logic through depoliticising the space for alternative narratives of asylum. In this context, the framing of the burden emerges as a discursive and symbolic

achievement of the neoliberal politics of asylum accommodation. The burden represents both a move to position asylum as a specific and managerial issue, thereby denying the possibility of universality associated with political claims-making (Rancière 1999), and at the same time reiterates an economic account of asylum as a question of resource allocation, cost and productivity. The burden and the perceptual field it sustains have become common sense, such that it is hard to consider policy, or politics, beyond its reach. With this in mind, I conclude by pointing to three significant implications that have arisen from this analysis.

First, while the changes seen in asylum accommodation through COMPASS have been marked, they do not reflect a sea-change in the logics or practice of dispersal itself. The neoliberal rationales now at the heart of dispersal have in some ways driven the institutional provision of accommodation from the outset, with local authority provision often based on an economic decision to gain rent from hard-to-let social housing. While the geography of dispersal may be changing as private providers seek to procure properties in new areas of low-cost housing stock, this process is building on a previous geography of dispersal that saw asylum seekers housed in areas of existing social deprivation (see Hynes and Sales 2010; Phillips 2006). The realities of COMPASS are therefore those of both continuity and change. New relationships of authority have emerged as a result, but the same drive to economic efficiency, low cost provision and minimal support remains. The neoliberal logic that frames dispersal may have been deepened through COMPASS, but its roots run through the position of public and private providers in previous models too. As such, this paper has highlighted the need to not only explore the conditions imposed by the neoliberalisation of asylum, but also to further unpack the histories of neoliberal rationality that have shaped and continue to shape how asylum is understood.

Second, it is important to recognise that points of opposition and contestation are emergent within the dispersal system. There are two possible arenas of contestation that emerge here. First, as Williams *et al.* (2012, 1495) argue, forms of resistance to neoliberal modes of governance exist through the 'frontline actions of staff' involved in sustaining and producing systems of welfare and service provision. These actions represent 'incremental sites of subverting the intended processes and outcomes of government policy' (Williams *et al.* 2012, 1495; see Barnes and Prior 2009), as they allow for moments of discretion and interpretation that break from existing neoliberal scripts. Thus while the soft spaces of stakeholder forums may constrain debate, these can never fully control the actions of individuals tasked with performing the state. The second possible area of challenge comes from the

towns and cities that make up the geography of dispersal itself. As Newman argues, local authorities are not simply the passive victims of neoliberal forces but can also be ‘incubators of new possibilities that may bend or adapt neoliberal logics ... [and] establish alternative pathways’ (2014, 3296; see also Wilson 2015). We might see such alternative pathways in efforts by councils across the UK to challenge government policy on the destitution of asylum seekers through passing motions of opposition (Darling 2016b). Importantly, as Laura, a third sector representative from the Midlands argues, this opposition may be made easier in the context of COMPASS:

The COMPASS contract has made it easier to engage some local councils in terms of asylum issues because I could imagine trying to get a council to pass an anti-destitution motion whilst they were still responsible for housing would be very, very difficult because they would have to accept that they'd let someone down. (Laura interview 2014)

Mobilising local authorities to oppose the destitution of asylum seekers becomes easier in a context where their interests in accommodation are suspended. Similarly, the positioning of local authorities as lacking control over asylum accommodation may offer space for alternative accounts of asylum to gain traction. With financial interests in dispersal suspended, cities may have the space to reconsider the extent to which asylum seekers really are a burden. As Newman asserts, for local authorities, political critique ‘is not simply a matter of opposition: it is vested in practices, relationships and the promotion of economic, social and political alternatives’ (2014, 3300). In the field of asylum accommodation, COMPASS may offer local authorities an opportunity to explore those alternatives.

Crucially though, such alternatives will not be envisioned in a context where asylum is depoliticised both governmentally and discursively and while asylum seekers are framed as a burden. Framing asylum seekers as a burden enables the lives of vulnerable individuals to be positioned as commodities for marketisation and legitimates the exclusion that runs through dispersal as a mode of regulatory governance (Darling 2011). Addressing the political closures of asylum accommodation and the drive to profit from human vulnerability will clearly not be achieved solely through the discursive repoliticisation of asylum as an issue of social justice. However, as Jessop (2014, 216) reminds us, depoliticisation is not an inevitable or incontestable feature of political life. Rather, depoliticisation is a contingent and uncertain process, one open to critique and repoliticisation as issues may be rearticulated and reframed as ‘suitable subjects of active policy making rather than policy inertia’ (2014, 216). In a context where the logic of the asylum-seeking

market has gone relatively unchallenged, and where alternative proposals are extremely rare, a small but significant first step is to denounce the language and logic of the burden at every opportunity.

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Notes

- 1 G4S was awarded contracts to provide accommodation in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber and in the Midlands and East of England. Serco was awarded contracts for accommodation in Scotland and Northern Ireland and in the North West, and Clearell for London and the South East, and Wales and the South West.
- 2 In this paper I understand markets, following Callon and Muniesa (2005, 1229), as ‘collective devices’ that enable the collective calculation and assignment of value, the negotiation of a large number of agents and interests, and the production and distribution of new social and political relations (Callon 2007). While the functioning of the COMPASS contracts reflect these varying market characteristics in different ways, an in-depth analysis of these calculative and distributive functions is not possible here. Rather, the present focus is on how a conception of the market as a social, political and economic orientation guides neoliberal governmentalities of policy and practice (Lemke 2001).
- 3 The wider project on which this paper is based examined how four British cities manage the asylum dispersal process. The cities studied (Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and Sunderland) were selected to reflect varying levels of asylum dispersal, varying demographics and histories of diversity, and differing positions within political structures of devolution. Interviews were supplemented with the analysis of regional and national policy documents on dispersal, asylum support services and refugee resettlement, and with media coverage from each of the four cities. This paper's consideration of the neoliberal governmentality of

dispersal emerges from accounts of how the transition to COMPASS has been managed, and is empirically centred on discussions with those at the forefront of this transition. All interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

- 4 While the wider project on which this paper is based drew on the views of those dispersed, these experiences of policy are not directly addressed here in order to focus on the governmental practice of policy. Addressing how such experiences may offer potential routes for politicisation is the focus of a future publication and, as such, the current paper provides a context on which this discussion of politicisation will be built.
- 5 This reduction in the capacity of local authorities to remain present in public policy is not restricted to asylum. Rather, in a context of fiscal austerity and the retrenchment of public services, many areas of public policy are being transferred into models of private provision or third sector voluntarism (Blanco *et al.* 2014).
- 6 'Brummies' is a West Midlands colloquialism referring to people from Birmingham.
- 7 The political context of austerity that surrounds COMPASS is not dealt with in detail here for reasons of length, but is the focus of a forthcoming paper that examines how the economic logics of COMPASS intersect with demands for cuts in asylum support from central government.
- 8 UKBA refers to the United Kingdom Borders Agency, formerly the government department with responsibility for asylum policy. In 2013 UKBA was subsumed within the wider functioning of the UK Home Office.

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